Report on VU Amsterdam’s History programme development discussion, 22 November 2019

Key questions for the development discussion:
The target group for higher education are millennials who, in the modern information society, take a different approach to knowledge and skills and have different expectations from the generations to which our teaching staff belong. Is there a new type of student with a different (or perhaps even deficient) academic attitude? An attitude that requires different teaching methods or a different type of lecturer?

The characteristics of this so-called ‘new student’ were discussed by the participants in the development discussion. This focus is important in order to keep us thinking about alternative teaching methods and how to make students and teaching staff aware of them. The ‘new’ students:

- are often first-generation students and sometimes have no idea of what studying at a university entails and lack role models they can learn from
- are more likely to be financially dependent on their parents and part-time jobs and are therefore busy at home and work in addition to their studies
- read fewer books than students in the past, which means that learning to read books and reference works has to be addressed in courses
- lack a clear awareness of the transition from school to university, which sometimes leads to a lack of clarity about what a university education demands of them
- do a lot of their studying on electronic devices (e.g. laptops), which are also a source of distraction that can lead to loss of concentration
- find it difficult to reflect on history as a subject because many of them have not learned to do so at secondary school; this requires added attention.

A number of additional points were made about international students or working in mixed classes:
- international students seem more committed than their Dutch counterparts
- some Dutch students seem a bit intimidated by their international counterparts, for example when it comes to their knowledge of literature.

The discussion led the panel members and participating lecturers to make the following suggestions and observations:
- Set up an intensive course at the start of first year (e.g. the first week) designed to increase student awareness of the difference between secondary education and higher education. (This has been tried but participation was low and assessment proved difficult.)
- The existing mentorship is working well
- Introduce a new course that involves reading a book or attending a doctoral defence
- Start a book club through study association Merlijn for teaching staff as well as students
- Organize seminars without laptops and other digital resources (improves concentration and content is processed more effectively if you write rather than type)
- Weave academic skills into the fabric of the programme
Emphasize the importance of academic skills at the start of the first year and continue to do so in subsequent periods.